

Christ Reformed Church
(First United Church of Christ)
1501-07 12th Avenue
Intown Neighborhood
Altoona
Blair County
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-5514

HABS

PA,

7-ALTO,

101-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

CHRIST REFORMED CHURCH
(First United Church of Christ)

HABS No. PA-5514

HABS
PA.
7-ALTO,
101-

Location: 1501-07 12th Ave. (southwest corner of 15th Street and 12th Avenue), Altoona, Blair County, Pa.

Present Owner: First United Church of Christ.

Present Use: Church.

Significance: Christ Reformed Church was the second home of a congregation which was formed in 1863 as the German Reformed Missionary Congregation in Altoona. In 1870, it changed its name to Christ Reformed Church. Built of random-coursed, ashlar brownstone with smooth-faced brownstone trim, the church and its adjoining parsonage were designed by Frederic Shollar, architect of Altoona's City Hall. Among the church's more outstanding features are a tower with belfry, crowned by four small onion domes, and several Gothic-arched windows with tracery.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1902-03. The cornerstone was laid June 16, 1902. The building was dedicated June 21, 1903.
2. Architect: Frederic J. Shollar (1873-1960) of Altoona was the architect. Born in Williamsburg, Pa., and educated in the public schools, Shollar bears the distinction of being Blair County's first native-born architect. He apprenticed to his father, a self-taught architect-builder, and in 1887 began the formal study of architecture in the offices of Charles M. Robinson in Altoona. Subsequently, Shollar worked as superintendent of the Glass and Garrettson planing mill, as a draftsman for the Altoona Concrete and Construction Company, and as an architect in Tyrone, Pa., from 1897 to 1900.

In 1900, Shollar opened offices in downtown Altoona. Christ Reformed Church, one of Shollar's earliest designs, is more closely related to the work of his mentor, Charles Robinson, than to the buildings for which he is best known--the brick and limestone-faced, Neoclassical structures of the 1910s and 1920s. One of the city's most respected and prolific architects, Shollar designed more than 500 residential, commercial, and ecclesiastical buildings, either individually, in association with Frank A. Hersh of Altoona (ca. 1903-15 and ca. 1925-30s), or in partnership with his son Gerald, also an architect. (Davis, II: 127-8. Altoona Mirror [January 16, 1960])

3. Original and subsequent owners: The German Reformed Missionary Congregation has occupied the site since 1864. In 1870, the congregation changed its name to Christ Reformed Church. In 1938, it took the name Christ Evangelical and Reformed Church, and in 1957, First United Church of Christ.
4. Builder, contractor, suppliers: P. W. Finn was the contractor for Christ Reformed Church. Little is known of his background and training, yet Patrick Finn (d. 1940) dominated the construction

CHRIST REFORMED CHURCH
(First United Church of Christ)
HABS No. PA-5514 (Page 2)

industry in the early twentieth century. In the 1890s he was associated with the firm Finn and Walsh, which advertised in Altoona's city directories as specialists in cut stone work. This firm provided stone for such buildings as James H. Windrim's Masonic Temple (1897-98). By the turn of the century, however, Finn was not only providing materials, but his crews were receiving most of the city's major contracting jobs, and were often at work on more than one building at a time.

In addition to Christ Reformed Church, P. W. Finn and Company erected the First Evangelical Lutheran Church (1896-97), First Methodist Episcopal Church (1905-06), Mishler Theatre (1905-06; and rebuilding, 1906), Rothert Building (1906), Central Trust Building (1905-06), and Eagles Lodge (1912-13). Finn and his wife first resided at 2606 Broad Ave., in a brownstone house that he constructed in 1892; this house is no longer extant. By 1900, they had moved to a mansion in Ant Hills, just south of Altoona, where they lived until the late 1920s. This landmark, a three-and-a-half-story brownstone building, with lavish mahogany trim and Art Nouveau stained-glass windows, was demolished to make way for a parking lot in 1989.

B. Historical Context:

The congregation of Christ Reformed Church was organized in 1863 as a mission under the care of the Westmoreland Classis of the German Reformed Church of the United States. Led by the Reverend Cyrus S. Cort, who began his work in Altoona in 1863, the congregation erected its first church and rectory at the corner of 12th Avenue and 15th Street (then known as Emma and Clara streets), in 1864-68. The church's wood spire, which rose 75', was not completed until 1873. This first church was a Gothic Revival-style building constructed of stone instead of the more typical red brick, the building material of choice for five other downtown churches. A detached, stone parsonage stood next to the church at 1505 12th Ave.

By 1902, membership had soared to 600 congregants, compared to 450 in 1896. The old building was razed in 1902, and this larger and "more modern" church and parsonage were constructed in its place. Although the congregation of Christ Reformed Church was of German origin, English was spoken in the pulpit by the time the new church had been completed. According to one observer, "Not a fourth of the congregation would understand it if German were spoken."¹

Christ Reformed Church was the parent of three other congregations. In 1888, 133 members were dismissed to form Trinity Reformed Church across the railroad tracks at 8th Avenue and 7th Street. Again, in 1897, fifty-five members were dismissed to form Grace Church. A third group later formed yet another congregation--Salem Church, in 1909. The diverse locations of these four churches indicate that congregations of German origin were dispersed throughout the city, rather than concentrated in any one of its residential sections.²

¹Charles B. Clark, Illustrated Altoona (Altoona: Privately printed, 1896), 83.

²125 Anniversary First United Church of Christ, 1863-1988 (Altoona: Privately printed, 1988), 1.

CHRIST REFORMED CHURCH
(First United Church of Christ)
HABS No. PA-5514 (Page 3)

The parsonage adjoining the church no longer serves its original function; a new parsonage has recently been erected in the Fairview section of the city.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The stylistic elements of Christ Reformed Church were freely adapted from both medieval and classical precedents. Its Gothic-arched exterior doors with strap hinges point to a medieval influence; the four onion domes reflect the late Victorian fascination with all things exotic; and the parsonage's Palladian window and porch are Neoclassical. Two towers and several steeply pitched cross gables add verticality to the building's low, rectangular massing.
2. Condition of fabric: Very good.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: The one-story stone church has three bays on 12th Avenue and six bays on 15th Street.
2. Foundations: Rough-cut, semi-coursed fieldstone. According to a newspaper account of the cornerstone-laying ceremony, foundation stone from the old church was used in the construction of this new building.
3. Walls: The walls are of random-coursed, ashlar brownstone with smooth brownstone accents around the windows and doors. On the asymmetrical 15th Street facade, there are three steeply pitched cross gables, each containing different sizes of Gothic-arched windows. The first bay projects slightly from the rest of the building. The 12th Avenue facade, which is also asymmetrical, has two cross gables, one with a large, Gothic-arched window, and the second with an entrance door and paired, Gothic-arched windows above.
4. Structural system: The church has stone bearing walls.
5. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: There are two entrances on 15th Street and two on 12th Avenue. Primary entrances are located at both sides of the corner tower. Each of these doorways has Gothic-arched openings with stained-glass transom windows and double doors. The doors are painted bright orange and fitted with black strap hinges. The secondary entrances, which also have Gothic arches and stained-glass transom windows, are located in the third bay of the 15th Street facade and the third bay of the 12th Avenue facade.
 - b. Windows: The majority of the window openings have Gothic arches, stained glass, and tracery. The most outstanding of these are two large windows depicting biblical scenes, one in the fifth bay of the 15th Avenue side and the other in the second bay of the 12th Avenue facade. In addition, the

CHRIST REFORMED CHURCH
(First United Church of Christ)
HABS No. PA-5514 (Page 4)

corner tower has two round windows at the roof level. All of the tracery and other wood trim is painted white to maximize its contrast with the dark stone walls.

6. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: Front-gabled roof, shingled in black asphalt, with a variety of cross gables on the front and side facades.
 - b. Tower: The square corner tower, which rises 50', has a belfry crowned with four small onion domes.
- C. Description of Interior: An inner vestibule leads to the hall-plan sanctuary, whose pulpit faces north. The walls and vaulted ceiling of the sanctuary are white, finished with plaster on lath; the floor has new red carpet. The original balcony, over the eastern side of the building, was recently removed.
- D. Parsonage: The parsonage, which adjoins the church on 12th Avenue, is constructed of the same random-coursed, ashlar brownstone exterior as the church. Two-and-a-half stories high, the parsonage measures 27' x 120'. It has a hipped roof with a gable over the two-story, asymmetrical projecting bay. All of the windows have one-over-one-light, double-hung sash; there is a Palladian window in the gable. The front porch, which extends across most of the facade, has a hipped roof and Neoclassical entablature supported by Doric columns.
- E. General setting and orientation: The Christ Reformed Church and parsonage are located on southwest corner of 15th Street and 12th Avenue. In the 1900s, the church stood in a residential neighborhood composed of two-story frame and brick-veneered dwellings. The commercial development of the 1920s dramatically altered the character of this neighborhood; today the church stands opposite a five-story furniture store (now vacant), and next door to the three-story Bell of Pennsylvania Building.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- A. Original architectural drawings: None located.
- B. Early view: A lithograph of the first church occupied by the German Reformed Missionary Congregation is located in the sanctuary of the church.
- C. Bibliography:
 - 1. Primary sources:
 - "Cornerstone Laid," Altoona Morning Tribune (June 16, 1902).
 - Altoona, Pennsylvania. New York: Sanborn Map and Publishing Co., Ltd., 1888.
 - "Former Altoona Architect Dies in California." Altoona Mirror, (January 16, 1960).
 - Insurance Maps of Altoona, Pennsylvania. New York: Sanborn-Perris

Co., 1894.

Insurance Maps of Altoona, Blair County, Pennsylvania. New York: Sanborn Map Co., 1909.

2. Secondary sources:

Clark, Charles B. Illustrated Altoona. Altoona: Privately printed, 1896.

Davis, Tarring S., ed. A History of Blair County. Vol. II. Harrisburg: National Historical Association, 1931.

125 Anniversary: First United Church of Christ, 1863-1988. [Brochure], 1988.

- D. Additional Sources: The history of the German Reformed Missionary Congregation merits further attention. In particular, it is important to know when English replaced German as the liturgical language, and under what circumstances. Did the change come about after a long and angry battle within the congregation? Information from church records and census returns could contribute to a better understanding of the assimilation process for Altoona's German-born population.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

This report was part of a larger project to document the city of Altoona, Pennsylvania. The project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER), Robert Kapsch, chief, at the request of America's Industrial Heritage Project (AIHP), Randy Cooley, director. An overview of the history of the city (HABS No. PA-5784) and an overview of the downtown (HABS No. PA-5789) provide context for these buildings as well as a comprehensive list of sources. See also additional HABS reports on buildings in the city and other neighborhoods.

This report was prepared by Nancy Spiegel in the summer of 1989 under the supervision of HABS historian Alison K. Hoagland and Kim E. Wallace, supervisory historian. Spiegel's and other project historians' work was published as Railroad City: Four Historic Neighborhoods in Altoona, Pennsylvania (Washington, D.C.: HABS/HAER, National Park Service, 1990), edited by Kim E. Wallace and Sara Amy Leach, HABS historian.